

Photographs Recall Landmark Era in the African American Story

Washington, DC's monumental face is the one most visitors see, the image most associated with the nation's capital. The city's less public side—as a longtime hometown to a large African American population—is often eclipsed by the iconic. Now this rich heritage is being preserved at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History in an incomparable record of African American life, the photographs taken by Addison Scurlock and his sons. Working out of their DC studio, the Scurlocks amassed 83 years' worth of images, yielding an intimate portrait of the city's daily life.

assassination, son Robert took to the streets, his images of a city in despair finding an audience in the pages of *Life*.

Most of the collection, in the form of deteriorating negatives in boxes and envelopes, is in the process of being stabilized, organ-



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Left: Publicity shot for Robert Scurlock, who followed his father into the business. Right: A formal portrait displays the Scurlock artistry.

The Smithsonian acquired the collection of some 230,000 photographs in 1994. Part of it is being made available online through a grant from the National Park Service-administered Save America's Treasures program. *Portraits of a City: The Scurlock Photographic Studio's Legacy to Washington, DC* is made up of the Scurlocks' pictures of community gatherings, birthdays, weddings, streetscapes, and people posed and at work.

The time span ranges from 1911 to 1994; during most of the period racial barriers ensured that Washington's African American society remained insulated from its white neighbors. The same was true of Scurlock himself. Though his studio in the Shaw neighborhood was busy, he was largely unknown beyond the city's borders. The black community, however, recognized his talents, as does the rest of the world today.

Scurlock was the official photographer for Howard University, known to African Americans nationwide as the center of a cultural mecca. "One of the marks of arriving socially in black Washington was to have your portrait hanging in Scurlock's window," says a *Washington Post* article on the studio's legacy, which includes images of W.E.B. DuBois, Duke Ellington, Martin Luther King, Jr., Sidney Poitier, and Billie Holiday.

While DC served as the stage for national pageantry, the Scurlock photographs reveal what local historian Constance McLaughlin Green calls "the secret city." People pose in their Sunday finest, their wedding attire, their military uniforms. There is a sense of dropping in on another place and time. A neon-lit steakhouse gives off a powerful film noir atmosphere. At Johnson's Sandwich Shop, the proprietors face the camera, the day's menu on a chalkboard behind the counter, ready for the lunch-hour rush. A funeral home's empty foyer has a melancholy air. "People were trying to live ordinary lives in challenging times," says curator John Fleckner. "Simultaneously, they were challenging those times. The Scurlocks were part of that." In the wake of the King

ized, and stored. Information is sketchy on most images; staffers hope with the visibility on the Web people will come forward to help.

The Smithsonian is in the process of matching the \$125,000 Save America's Treasures grant, having raised about \$67,000 from corporations and private donors.

"This has been a multiracial city from the very beginning," says Fleckner. "This collection portrays one hundred years of that . . . It is the community celebrating itself."

The collection—online at <http://americanhistory.si.edu/archives/scurlock/>—can be searched by using the Smithsonian Institution Research Information System.

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